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The Building of the Bridge.



AN IDYL

OF

The River Saint John.

BY

Barry Straton,

Author of "Days of Love, and Other Poems," Etc.

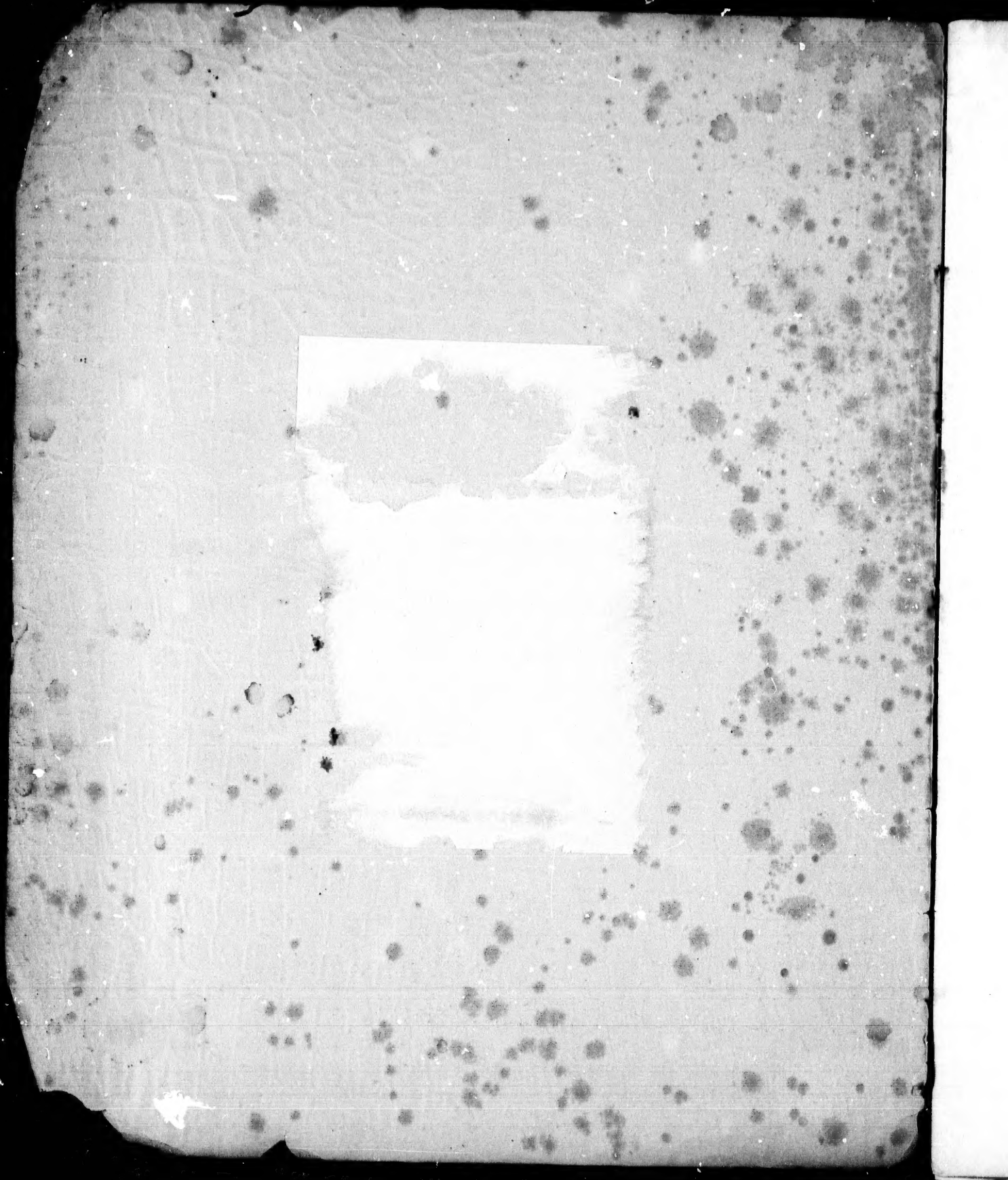


Saint John, N. B.

J. & A. McMillan, Printers and Publishers, 98 Prince William Street.

1887.

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# The Building of the Bridge.



AN IDYL OF THE RIVER SAINT JOHN.

BY

Barry Straton,

Author of "Days of Love, and Miscellaneous Poems."



SAINT JOHN, N. B.

J. & A. McMILLAN, 98 PRINCE WILLIAM STREET.  
1887.



Respectfully Dedicated to

The Hon. A. G. Blair,

*Attorney General  
of the Province of New Brunswick,*

On the Occasion of the Opening of the Bridge at  
Fredericton, November 27th, 1885.





The Building of the Bridge.



PROEM.



TO THE RIVER SAINT JOHN.

*Since thy waters sprang from the black night chaotic,  
Alien from thy orient shore, mourned thy hesperian strand;  
Past is now thy power vast of tides despotic,  
For our bridge shall bind them like a golden marriage band.  
What we join together,  
May no stress of weather,—  
Winds that war above this pledge with lightning and hoarse thunder,  
Or thy rushing spring-flood, with crushing ice-floes under,—  
Put ruthlessly asunder.*

*Broad, majestic stream, for knowledge I beseech thee;  
Move my soul to song as strong as thy resistless flow!  
Water, elemental in man's nature, teach me;  
Tell me what thy murmurs mean, and ripples whispering low!  
I, a minstrel idle,  
Fain would sing the bridal  
Of thy sunny shores, with blissful peace and plenty crowned,—  
Fain would weave some story  
As tribute to thy glory,  
Fair New Brunswick's proudest stream, in our fond hearts enthroned!*

WHO gazes on this graceful bridge,  
The offspring of prosperity,  
The people's pride and privilege,—  
Each arch a rainbow to assure  
This tide shall bar our path no more,—  
Sees more than outward eye may see,  
If, giving flow to fantasy,  
He follows where sweet thoughts allure,  
Nor deems it weakness to possess  
A mind such pleasures may impress.

All arts must have their infancy  
And gradual growth, whether they be  
Mechanical, which toil and build,  
Rearing this bridge with skillful hand,  
Or those which cultured ease demand,  
And each holds honor for its guild,  
And all spring from necessity.

Far backward in barbarian years  
I see the treacherous stepping-stone  
By nature placed, or, haply, thrown  
By skin-clad man to thwart the stream,  
And capped by safer fire-wrought beam,  
Reared by the rude arch-architect.  
The prime inception of these piers  
And airy spans which we perfect.

But ere the birth of building Man  
In Asia, cradle of the Race,  
Nature, who loves to educate,  
Had reared a strange ærial span,  
A bridge of massive strength and grace,  
Which man may never duplicate,  
In this New World. In that demesne



Named from the English Virgin Queen,  
The ponderous limestone arch was hung  
When new-born spheres together sung.  
Like life of man, now cloud, now sheen,  
The brooklet brattles through the glade,  
At bottom of that dark ravine  
By ancient torrents slowly made,  
So deep, who gazes from below  
Beholds all day the stars aglow.

As crude as stepping-stones and trees  
Are those rough ropes of twisted bark,  
And sliding baskets, stretching o'er  
Debarring cañons, deep and dark,  
Where down the sheer declivities  
Of the rich Andes torrents pour,  
Bursting in spray with thunder loud,  
Born of eternal snows and cloud.

Another curious bridge behold  
At Iwakuni, in Japan, —  
The Nation's pride, three centuries old, —  
Whose arches five no roadway bear,  
No easy, level thoroughfare,  
But up and down them beast and man  
Climb on a toilsome wooden stair,  
Like boats by lazy billows rolled!

In all the Bridging Art's advance,  
Of all the records of its lore,  
None educates, none pleases more,  
None reads more like a sweet romance,  
Than that which tells how Benezet —  
Sainted by Church for deeds of good —  
Long years ago in Southern France,  
Pleasant with vale and rivulet,  
Formed that Bridge-Building Brotherhood  
Who built the welcome Inn at fords,

*The Building of the Bridge.*

As free to paupers as to lords,  
 And bridged the deeper streams, or made  
 Safe boats, that none might be delayed,  
 And wore, for work or worship drest,  
 The pick emblazoned on the breast.

*These toilers were akin to thee,  
 Fair River,—thou who teachest me,—  
 For, as the centuries sped on,  
 Did they not join in Chivalry  
 The Knightly Order of Saint John?*

Full well they builded in their day,  
 And on the walls of time we read,  
 "They wrought in services of peace,  
 That light might be, and groping cease;  
 They strove to fill their people's need;  
 Their glory passeth not away."

When Rome's proud sceptre swayed the earth,  
 Not all of War her warriors taught;  
 In public works her people wrought,  
 And first the graceful arch applied  
 To safely span the treacherous tide,  
 Giving the Bridging Art new birth.  
 Vast aqueducts o'er sloping vales,  
 Which to their towns sweet waters bore,  
 Whose ruins read like fairy tales,  
 Arch above arch her builders reared,  
 Which, high and strong, yet light appeared,  
 And bridges famous in old lore.

Who turns not fondly to the page,  
 Dreamed over in scholastic youth,  
 Which witnesses the bridge which stood,  
 Through years of happiness or ruth.  
 Above the sacred Tiber's flood,  
 Where, in the Commonwealth's early age,  
 The three brave Romans held at bay



Etruria's conquering array!  
Base Tarquin, banished, held in hate  
The liberated Roman State  
By Brutus freed, and now he came  
With Tuscan foes and chiefs of fame,  
And vanquished on the plains about  
The Roman force that sallied out.  
Across the bridge the Romans poured,  
And, hard behind, the Tuscan horde  
Came rushing, and had won the town  
Before the bridge were overthrown,  
And given it to sack and sword,  
Had not Horatius held in play  
The foe within that narrow way,  
With Spurius Lartius on his right,  
Herminius on his left, to fight.  
Here they withstood the swift attack;  
Fierce were the blows they gave and took,  
And when behind the timbers shook,  
Herminius, Lartius, sped them back,  
But still Horatius faced the foe,  
Brave as a lion mad with blood  
Who rules the jungle as his own,  
Urtill into the droumy flood,  
Swollen and eddying below,  
The sundered bridge fell thundering down.

Then, in his battered armor girt,  
And weak from many a bleeding hurt,  
With sword in sheath and shield in hand,  
Horatius leapt into the tide,  
And swam to reach the other side,  
Welcomed with mighty shouts to land.

O, glorious man, of gallant deed!  
Thou and thy comrades shall not die,  
But live with us in minstrelsy,  
And in fair Canada's direst need

The tale shall fire our soldiery,  
And teach our sons to fight and bleed.

As years sped on, man's cultured brain  
Evolved more-glorious industry:  
Our builders new material sought,  
And thus, in Britain's Isle we see  
How Stephenson and Darby wrought  
Their iron bridges, which remain  
Their monuments of skill and thought!  
Full well he builded in his day,  
Wise Stephenson! a seer of those  
Who nobly strive, with mighty throes,  
The spirit's promptings to obey,  
Of whom Fate's voice is heard to say,  
"However good the work he plan —  
Though arts advance and truths be found —  
His quest is never won of man,  
His work and wisdom have their bound,  
For, if he solve all mystery,  
He equaleth his Deity."

Though man be stubborn, strong, and stern,  
There dwells within much tenderness, —  
Warm loves which starve for happiness, —  
Emotions which for kindness yearn  
As children crave a fond caress, —  
Nor is it strange that he should turn  
From some vast bridge with arts aglow,  
And think more fair the moss-grown bow,  
Which, in some country solitude,  
Where babel trade may not intrude,  
Spans some sweet whisper-hiding burn,  
Where, in the gloaming, lovers meet  
Beneath the kindly arching boughs,  
To breathe the old, old tale, and vows  
Heart-born and holy, strong and sweet.

A different scene, in shadows dun,  
The pitying soul now broods upon,  
And sees on Beresina's flood  
Two bridges, red and dank with blood,  
Built for his perishing army's flight,  
When through cold Russia's wintry gloom  
Napoleon hastened from his doom, —  
When, hovering round him day and night,  
The Cossacks on the sufferers fell,  
Coming like shadows unawares,  
Like leopards leaping from their lairs,  
Revengeful, strong, implacable.  
The exhausted, striving pontoniers  
Died as they wrought, and when each pass  
Was choked with the retreating mass,  
The Russian batteries on the bank  
Hurled crashing ball and shrieking shell,  
All aimed and timed so deadly well  
They swept the victims, rank on rank,  
Mangled and torn, beneath the wave,  
Of thousands the untended grave.

For them the roof-trees wait in vain;  
No welcome swells their hearts again;  
No friends shall shout on their return,  
No wifely lips shall kiss and yearn,  
No leaping babes shall laugh and prate,  
And hearts and homes are desolate.

*Ah, River! strife is weariness, and woes and want its wages;  
Bid Death destroy his bridge of boats, and wars forever cease.  
Their records read with dreariness,—oh, close the bloody pages!  
I listen for thy glistening notes which sing our bridge of peace.*

Fair, light and strong our bridge shall be;  
No wasteful weight our builders rear;  
The skilled, ingenious Engineer,  
Versed in the records of his art,

*The Building of the Bridge.*

Seeking great strength, with symmetry,  
The points of weight and strain defines,  
And builds his structure on these lines,  
Rejecting every useless part ;  
With arch and truss-work aptly joined.  
He plans for strength and grace combined.

That People shall not retrograde  
Who view, in daily life displayed,  
The love of beauty. He who sees  
The pleasing structures of his land,  
Though he be slow to understand,  
Must grasp some meaning by degrees,  
Must feel some thoughts within him stir,  
Must hear some promptings which aver,  
"They point to life more broad, more grand,  
They tell of things more fair than these."  
Then shall his heart know warmer moods,  
His soul reach higher altitudes.

Culled from the eloquent solitudes  
Of fair New Brunswick's wealthy woods,  
Tough birch, outlasting years of years,  
Shall form foundations for the piers.  
Jointed and bolted, and hemmed around  
By ponderous piles which pierce the ground,  
And filled with anchoring tons of rocks,  
Deep in the stream the stout cribs lie  
And stem the tide which rushes by  
And bravely bear the ice-floe's shocks.  
O, builders! lay them true and strong ;  
For if the humbler work go wrong  
The finer parts ye rear in vain :  
Even so the social life of man,  
Which national strength may ne'er attain  
Unless each fill his destined sphere,  
However lowly in life's plan,

With patient hearts that toil and bear,  
Defying fortune, large with cheer.

And next the stalwart piers we raise  
Of cedar, wood which Solomon  
Hewed from the slopes of Lebanon  
When building to his MAKER's praise.

*(Ah! Solomon, in glory dressed,  
Was not arrayed like one of these  
Nude lilies slumbering on thy breast,  
O, thou fair stream of mysteries!)*

We sheathe them in the water-ways  
With planks of birch, that ice and drift  
May take no hold, may find no rift,  
To work them harm; the sloping prows  
We plate with iron, like mighty plows,  
To cut the ponderous flocs which lift  
When, strong as death, which none may fly,  
The giant spring-flood crushes by.

Meanwhile, upon the eastern bank,  
Where timber for each span is stored,  
The shores resound with busy clank  
As skilled mechanics ply their trade,  
Shaping the solid Southern pine  
For arch and brace, and post, and chord,  
Following the plan in every line,  
Till every shapely part is made  
And fashioned to the true design.  
The sturdy blows fall thick and fast,  
The sundered chips fly left and right  
From early dawn to early night,  
As leaves before a wintry blast  
From skeleton trees are scattered down,  
And loudly from the waiting town  
The impatient, watchful whistles blow  
As the tides of labor ebb and flow.

*The Building of the Bridge.*

Behold the dignity of toil!  
These are our Country's flesh and bones,—  
These are the Nation's beams and stones,—  
First, he who tills the generous soil,  
Winning a People's daily food,  
And then the mighty multitude  
Of laborers and tradesmen skilled,  
Who work and strive, who plan and build,  
In Arts well learned and understood.  
Their toil allows the grace and ease  
Of those within the wealthy zone,  
And they, in turn, their task must own,  
Nor hide their talents in the ground,  
For suffering and gloom abound,  
And it is theirs to banish these.  
And wherewith shall the strife be laid  
Which shackles wealth, and toil, and trade?  
There is a law within the soul  
Whose mandates softly breathe content,  
And calm injustice and dissent,—  
Unwrit save in the Holy Scroll,—  
The Law of Conscience, this should sway  
Master and workman night and day.  
A generous wage for willing work,  
Whether it be of hand or brain,—  
The toiling arm which does not shirk,—  
The hand which grasps not all the gain,  
Smiting the humble laborer,—  
By these our Nation we shall rear,  
Until we be, from sea to sea,  
One happy home, one family,  
Where wealth, and toil, and trade shall meet  
And make our National life complete.

Now, rough and strong, from pier to pier  
A humble stage the builders rear,  
Of posts which pierce the ooze and mud,

And tremble in the tawny flood,  
To uphold the infant, growing span,  
As a mother holds in loving arms,  
Trembling for life's unseen alarms,  
The child who soon shall be a man.  
Then from the yard the beams are brought,  
To true dimensions deftly wrought  
For chord and arch, for post and stay,  
And set in place without delay,  
Till, one by one, each graceful span  
Is reared without a fault or flaw,  
As trim and true as on the plan,  
And smoothly swings the ponderous draw,  
A highway o'er a highway thrown,  
As busy ships speed up and down.

Ah! happy those whose wedded life,  
If ever marred by passing strife,  
Swings easily to its path again,  
For life hath darksome days and cares,  
And selfishness sets many snares,  
But love can let all faults glide past,  
Then close its portals firm and fast,  
More perfect for the break, the pain,  
As skies are fairest after rain.

Lo, after many toilful days  
Of single efforts multiplied,  
Of minutes chained in their swift flight,  
Of labor set in cheerful ways,  
Of knowledge ordering all aright, —  
The sum and end and visible praise  
Of mind and hand in work allied,  
Our Bridge, perfected, crowns the tide!

*O, River, tell it to the sea!  
Ring, waves, a marriage melody!  
Sigh, south winds, through each arch of pine,*



*The Building of the Bridge.*

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*Each bridal wreath old loves of thine;  
And calmly, winds and waters, dwell  
About the Bridge we love full well!*

And ye who caused this Bridge to be—  
Elected Architects of State,  
Who plan and build our Country's fate,—  
Who, wisely governing, fulfill  
The people's sacred, governing will,—  
Still build our Country's industry,  
Still work in services of peace  
That light may be, and groping cease,  
For gravest thought and strongest deed  
Alone can fill our people's need.  
Expound our full Provincial Rights,  
And jealousies and careless slights  
Meet ye with State-craft wise and bold,  
And thus our purer Union mould.

So work ye on our Bridge of State,  
Whose graceful spans are happy years  
Between the shores we may not see  
Of time and far eternity,  
Unbroke of craven doubts and fears,  
Leading to Empire broad and great,—  
So work ye on our Bridge of State,  
Whose piers are deeds of massive strength,  
Whose growing roadway's breadth and length  
Was planned by lives whose lustre fate  
May never darken or abate,  
That, when these days are ancient years,  
Your State-craft shine full bright like theirs.

*And wherewith shall I honor thee,  
Fair River, gliding to the sea,  
Whose vales and hill-tops lightly bear  
The beauty of a hemisphere?  
Were not our spirits closely wed,*

*Were not I by thy music led,  
No hand of mine dare fret the string  
That with thy praises joys to ring.*

When from thy bosom winter lifts,  
And, rent, the ice-bond seaward drifts,  
Upon thy hurrying, tireless tide  
The spoils of rifled forests float,  
Sent to thy arms from glades remote  
By spring-born brooks which wander wide.  
This is the lumberer's harvest home!  
These, held secure in raft or boom,  
Shall feed the panting mills which make  
Their busy hum on stream and lake,  
Coining, with muscles true and tried,  
That wooden wealth which, shipped o'er seas,  
Or to our growing towns supplied,  
Returns in golden treasures.

The steamers carrying life and freight,  
The fisherman who casts his net,  
The keeling yacht with white sails set,  
The oarsman in his strength elate,  
The deep-set ships, the freighter's boat  
Planned over summer shoals to float,  
By horses towed with patient gait,  
Gay with its gaudy banneret,—  
All these thy generous bosom bears,  
And each thy grace and bounty shares.

What day thy skies are blue and bright,  
Gorgeous with cloudlets, silvery white,  
And thy broad breast is ranked with foam  
By winds that waft rich cargoes home,  
Fair to the merchant is the sight,  
And dear to him whose public heart  
Joys in the welfare of his mart.

*The Building of the Bridge.*

What scene inanimate shows more grace  
Than these fair schooners, wing and wing,  
As, speeding to the busy town,  
They seem less ship than living thing!  
And, resting from the billowy race,  
Is there not music in the clink  
Of chains uncoiling, link by link,  
As the ponderous anchor splashes down  
To hold each goodly ship in place!  
Nor is it strange these barks should be  
Fair to the eyes of all who see,  
For all the elements they possess  
Which mould true grace and loveliness —  
Symmetry, motion, mystery,  
Stability, utility.  
Nor fair alone, but true, are these;  
Are not their cargoes always good,  
Employing a vast multitude,  
And filling their necessities?  
O, ye who nearest Heaven move, —  
Rich argosies of life and love,  
Outwardly graceful, beautiful, —  
Mothers, who give our Nation wives,  
And shape our future people's lives, —  
Be your full powers as dutiful,  
And of good works as bountiful!  
Ye who shall teach the pliant youth,  
Dispense the nobler thought and deed!  
Instil the broader, cosmic creed!  
And, in the light of God's white truth,  
The cowardly lies and maudlin strife,  
Which mar our homes and public life,  
Shall find with them no lot nor meed.

*Fair River! Health and wealth abide  
With all who take or stem thy tide!  
Now, prithee, softly sing for me  
The glory of thy scenery.*

Who, worn with work, would find sweet rest,  
May launch his buoyant bark, and glide  
Along thy sparkling, rippling tide,  
Some little distance to the west,  
Where stately elms rear slender stems  
Begirt by living anadems,  
Where emerald islands gem thy breast,  
And, domed by fleece-flecked, azure skies,  
Through sunny lands thy pathway lies.

This balmy morn in bridal June  
My soul's deep silences are stirred  
By thy refulgent views displayed,  
As by the love-song of a bird,  
A brooklet, draped in mist and shade,  
Which dim the brilliant beams of noon,  
Is haunted, and instinctive made,  
And I with thee am held attune.

The wandering airs that sway the grass  
Hold all the life thy distance gives,  
Hold part of everything that lives  
On mountain, meadow, or morass,  
And, gathering sweetness as they pass,  
Are redolent of rich perfumes  
From resinous pines and berry-blooms.

I know the secrets of thy streams,  
The dusky entrances which lead  
To quiet haunts, where herons feed,  
Where daylight pauses, sleeps and dreams.  
Within this circling woodland mere  
The swollen spring-tide swamps the grass,  
Save where the scattered hummocks rise,  
And over fields in harvest bare  
The waters eddy everywhere,  
And little mist-puffs pause or pass  
Like cloudlets in thy mirrored skies.

*The Building of the Bridge.*

Here, where the sunken weed-mesh parts,  
Wax-white lilies with golden hearts  
Sleep on the stream,—fair spirits, they,  
Of wooing beams that, on a day,  
Sighed through the maple boughs above,  
And died upon thy breast for love!

This is the utter lust of sight—  
This scene of land and water wed—  
Lit by the morning's sloping light,  
Through shifting screens of alders shed,  
And mingling boughs of arching trees,  
Which rather hush than voice the breeze.  
The lisping ripples in the reeds,  
The heron's foot-fall in the flood,  
These, only, mar the quietude,  
Save when a brown bee homeward speeds,  
Or darting, gleaming fishes rise  
To feed on circling gnats and flies  
Made slumbry by the solitude.

The water's verge I cannot trace,  
But seem to float and drift in space  
Upheld by potent, magic spell,  
For all this wealth of brown and green  
Inverted in the depths is seen,  
And past the tree-tops sink the skies,  
Blue, fathomless infinities,  
All formed so truly one scarce can tell  
Which are the phantoms, which the real.

*Thou enticing River! Whisper not so sweetly!  
Long I not for that dear spot, and, lo, the land is sere!  
Autumn wild has banished summer mild completely;  
Lilies, pines, and berry-blooms must bide the coming year.*

L'ENVOI.

TO THE RIVER SAINT JOHN.

*Lo, the song is finished !  
But no whit diminished  
Is the murmuring music of thy ripples on the piers.  
I, who o'er thee leaning,  
Faintly catch thy meaning,  
Sigh, for life is far too short to write the lore it bears.*

*Thus, thou mystic River,  
Shalt thou sing forever,  
Till time and tide are rolled aside and garnered with the years,—  
Sing when bridge and toilers  
Are garnered by the spoilers,  
Time and tide, which shall abide the unbuilding of the spàeres.*

*Yet shall we take some pleasure  
In our happy leisure,  
Leaning o'er thee from this bridge to con thy song aright ;  
Basking in thy radiance,  
Thankful for thy complaisance,  
Oblivious, for a little while, of Time's strong westering flight.*